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ABSTRACT

A special subgroup of Limited English Speaking students is often referred to as students with limited formal schooling (LFS) or "preliterates" because they have not yet had the opportunity to learn to read. This digest explores important aspects of the LFS student population, defining LFS students and discussing their impact on schools, individualized language development plans, classroom instruction, and the assessment of the LFS student. The LFS student is usually older, aged 12 to 21, and in most cases the LFS student possesses less than 2 years of formal education. The impact of LFS students on a school can be significant because they require special services and teacher professional development. It is recommended that an individualized language development plan be prepared for LFS students to ensure that their special needs are met. The LFS student requires a warm and supportive classroom where the goal is not only to teach literacy skills in the native language, but also to teach meaningful communication in and functional use of the English language. Assessing the progress of such students requires the use of a variety of assessment tools. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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The Preliterate Student: A Framework for Developing an Effective Instructional Program

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The number of limited English proficient (LEP) children attending American schools has grown dramatically over the past decade. Much of this growth has occurred in states and school districts that previously enrolled only a handful of these students. As the LEP student population has grown, so has the need for the development of special language-learning programs. The challenge of educating LEP students arises from the growth and diversity of this group of students and their diverse academic and social needs (Minicucci & Olsen, 1992).

Until recently, a majority of the secondary schools in the nation were meeting the needs of most of these LEP students by offering courses/programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) which were designed primarily for LEP students possessing literacy skills in their native language. However, with the continuous increases in enrollment of the LEP student population, the number of LEP students lacking literacy skills in their native language has also increased. As a result, there has been an increase in the need for programs designed specifically for this special segment of the LEP student population. This special group of LEP students is most often referred to in the literature as either students with limited formal schooling (LFS) or as "preliterates." Unlike the term "illiterate" which means not knowing how to read and write, the term preliterate implies that the individual will eventually obtain the aforementioned skills.

This article discusses important aspects of the LFS student population: LFS student defined, impact on schools, individualized language development plan, classroom instruction, and assessment of the LFS student.

WHO IS THE LFS STUDENT?

Generally, the LFS student is an older youth (aged 12-21) who lacks literacy skills in his/her native language because of limited formal education. In most cases, the LFS student possesses less than 2 complete years of a formal education and possesses a language proficiency that is either non-English or limited-English.

Various factors may contribute to the preliterate student's lack of a formal education. The need for the child to supplement the family's income and/or the need for the child to help in the home are two possible factors. Others may include the remote location of a home, the lack of parental supervision, and frequent moves caused by economic need or political turmoil (Morse, 1996; The TESOL Assoc., 1997).

The number of years a student spends in school, the quality of the education received, and the consistency of that educational experience is important in assessing all LEP students. Research indicates that students with strong academic and linguistic skills in the native language will more easily acquire a second language than those with weaker skills (Cummins, 1981). Students who are literate in their native language, who possess grade-level school experience, and who possess an uninterrupted educational background require a very different academic focus than students of the same age who possess only limited, if any, literacy skills in their native language. For instance, a student with limited literacy skills in the native language will require more native-language support than the literate student from the same country. Yet, a majority of the content courses in the typical middle school and high school rely on academic language proficiency in English.

HOW IS THE SCHOOL AFFECTED?

Although the percentage of the LFS youth in the school may only represent a small portion of the LEP student population, the impact can be significant. In most cases, the implementation of additional native language instructional services and the employment or reassignment of instructional assistants to provide these services is necessary. Services provided by these "special" instructional assistants often include instruction, translation between teacher and student, translation between staff and parents, and other language related tasks.

In addition, staff development training for all teachers in topics such as native language instruction, ESL in the content areas, and parental involvement is necessary. Because many of the preliterate students may come from backgrounds very different from those of most teachers, training in multicultural awareness is also important. Teachers must realize that the LFS student population generally finds all aspects of the school experience alien: language, culture, socioeconomic levels, schedules, procedures, and building facilities. Equally as important as the aforementioned topics, although not discussed as often, is the need to train teachers in the utilization of appropriate instructional strategies and the means (authentic assessment) by which to assess LFS students.

HOW DOES ONE DEVELOP AN INDIVIDUALIZED LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PLAN (ILDP)?

In an effort to determine the instructional strategies/activities that are most likely to prove effective in working with a particular LFS student, it is highly recommended that an Individualized Language Development Plan (ILDP) for that student be developed. The ILDP, adapted from an individualized education plan developed by Clark and Starr (1996), should serve as the basis for the content, the instructional activities, and the teaching activities that are to be selected for that particular student. In addition, the ILDP should serve as the basis from which to measure the LFS student's progress. The ILDP should include the following:

- an assessment of the student's present level of academic performance (reading/writing in the native language and math),
- an assessment of the student's English language proficiency,
- a diagnosis of the student's strengths and weaknesses,
- a statement of the long-term goals,
- an allocation of the time the student will spend in the selected program (an after school program, a self-contained classroom, a school within a school, a language development center, etc.),
- the person (teacher, parent, specialist, etc.) responsible for each aspect of the instructional service being provided,
- a statement of the short-term instructional goals necessary to attain long-term goals,
- specific recommendations concerning materials of instruction and teaching strategies, and
- appropriate assessment (portfolios, performance, anecdotal records, teacher observations, etc.).

In developing the ILDP, it is also highly recommended that ESL educators take into consideration the ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students as set forth by the TESOL Association (1997). The standards are organized by grade-level clusters (pre-K-3, 4-8, 9-12) and address different English proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, advanced, and limited formal schooling). The purpose of the ESL

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Standards is to improve the education of students learning English as a second or additional language in the United States.

WHAT TYPES OF INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES/ STRATEGIES BEST MEET THE NEEDS OF THE LFS STUDENT?

First and foremost, prior to considering the instructional activities/strategies to be used, it is extremely important that the student be provided with a warm, caring school/classroom environment. This is vital because, as previously stated, LFS students often find all aspects of the school environment alien. The idea of not "fitting in" can eventually result in the development of low self-esteem and the risk of dropping out (Johnson, Levy, Morales, Morse, and Prokopp, 1986). Past statistics indicate that for many secondary LEP students, the middle school is often the beginning of a high dropout rate (Minicucci, 1985; Olsen & Chenn, 1988).

Varying activities, providing cooperative learning opportunities, and using audio-visual aids while attempting to draw from the student's past experiences is an excellent strategy to implement. The goal is to not only teach students literacy skills in the native language, but to also teach meaningful, communicative, and functional use of the English language. The previously mentioned ESL Standards provide educators with a foundation from which to develop various meaningful opportunities for LFS students to learn English.

For example, giving students an opportunity to communicate (using English) in social settings is Goal 1 Standard 1 of the ESL Standards. According to Holt, Chips, and Wallace (1991), cooperative learning provides the structure for this to occur. In cooperative teams, students with lower levels of proficiency can interact with students who possess a higher level of proficiency in order to negotiate meaning of the content. In this type of learning environment, LFS students can begin to build a strong foundation in oral proficiency as they acquire literacy skills in the second language. Because all students engage in oral practice and utilize interpersonal skills, all students benefit.

According to Goal 1 Descriptors of the ESL Standards, activities like cooperative learning can provide students with an opportunity to share and request information, express needs and feelings, utilize nonverbal communication, engage in conversations, and conduct transactions. Cooperative learning activities can also provide LFS students with the skills that are necessary to function in real-life situations such as the utilization of context for meaning, the seeking of support from others, and the comparing of nonverbal and verbal cues.

Because LFS students are generally older, it is important that school learning result in discourse, products, and performances that have value or meaning in real life beyond success in school. For this reason, some school leaders argue that a distinction be made between academic literacy and functional literacy. Academic literacy is generally identified as that which is free from error in syntax and word structure, punctuation and spelling. Functional literacy, on the other hand, varies according to the individual's needs and divergent roles. These school leaders state that functional literacy rather than academic literacy should be the goal of education for preliterate students (Walker de Felix, Waxman, & Paige, 1994). As a result, many current high school programs have taken this idea a step further and developed courses that provide the LFS student with the training needed to acquire/maintain a job.

Because the focus of well-designed preliterate programs relies heavily on learning that is significant and meaningful in real life, authentic assessment is a must. The goal is to ascertain student progress via a variety of assessment tools. Continuous teacher observations (informal and/or formal), a collection of the student's work samples, and periodic anecdotal descriptions of the student's accomplishments are a few of the methods one can use in assessing the LFS student. To be fully effective, the student and the student's parents should be allowed to participate in assessing whether or not sufficient progress is being made.

Conclusion

Provided that schools recognize and address the special needs of the LFS student population, an LFS student can respond positively with dramatic progress. Although the progress will often vary dramatically from that of the literate LEP student, it is important that teachers recognize it as progress. A proper ILDP, effective instructional strategies, and authentic assessment aid all those involved (the student, the teacher, and the parents) in recognizing the progress made as such. The result is a sense of accomplishment and continued encouragement for learning.

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